Dave Durenberger news

U.S. Senator for Minnesota

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DURENBERGER LEADS 40 SENATORS IN CALL ON REAGAN ADMINISTRATION TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN EAST TIMOR

(Washington, D.C.) -- Senator Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.) and a bipartisan group of 39 Senate colleagues will send a letter to the Reagan administration Monday expressing concern over conditions in the Southeast Asian country of East Timor, particularly the humanitarian consequences of a reported renewal of Indonesian military activity there.

Durenberger said, "By sending this letter, my colleagues and I want to ensure that East Timor receives international attention that will help to alleviate the tragic suffering of Timorese people."

International human rights organizations and church bodies estimate that 150,000 East Timorese -- one fifth of the island country's population -- have perished from warfare and famine over the past 12 years. East Timor, a former Portugese colony about the size of New Jersey, was invaded and forcibly annexed by Indonesia in 1975. Nationalist insurgents continue to resist Indonesian rule. Indonesian officials have severely limited access to East Timor by relief agencies and press.

The letter to Secretary of State George Shultz, co-authored by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), states, "We feel that the [U.S.--Indonesian friendship] can only be strengthened by permitting unrestricted activity by international humanitarian agencies in East Timor...and visible progress on resolving the warfare in East Timor."

In their letter, the senators thank Secretary Shultz for raising the Timor issue with Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar in 1984 and 1986, and says that in light of the reported upsurge in military activity, "We believe that at the very least, international humanitarian organizations should have full access to East Timor so as to ensure the maximum degree of relief and protection to the civilian population and political detainees alike."

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The letter goes on to say: "While we understand that certain aspects of the East Timor situation have improved in recent years, we would like to ensure conditions do not deteriorate as a result of an increased level of Indonesian military activity."

The writers also noted that past Indonesian military offensives in East Timor "have been characterized by grave human rights violations...including summary executions, forced marches, relocation, torture, political imprisonment -- in addition to a catastrophic famine in East Timor from 1978-1980, we believe that reports of significant new Indonesian military operations in this territory warrant the concern of the United States Congress and the administration."

Durenberger noted that although little international attention has been focused on East Timor since 1975, the situation is slowly changing. In a March 31, 1987 statement, the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference expressed concern about the Timor situation and called for official American action, "to right the wrongs which continue to this day." The U.S. bishops noted that in 1984 Pope John Paul II expressed "grave concern" over the situation in East Timor, whose residents are predominantly Roman Catholic.

In their letter to Secretary Shultz, the 40 Senators also raised questions about reports of coercive population control programs in East Timor instituted by the Indonesian invaders. "Given sharp reduction of East Timor's population over the past eleven years and the fact that the territory was underpopulated prior to the Indonesian invasion, what is the justification for population control programs there?" the Senators asked.

Durenberger commented, "When a situation is out of the public eye, that is when the worst kind of abuses occur. The citizens of East Timor deserve the same basic human rights our nation advocates to the world, even if their situation is less known. I want to make it clear that their plight is not, and will not be, forgotten. The fact that 39 of my colleagues have signed this letter indicates that the United States Senate will not turn their eyes from the tragedy of East Timor."

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